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SUBJECT: POLITICAL INTRIGUE AROUND A LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER
CALLING FOR HIM TO RESIGN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A letter calling for Tongan Prime Minister Dr. Feleti "Fred" Sevele to resign caused a stir at the May 28 opening of Parliament. Senior parliamentarians and nobles alike reportedly supported the letter, which was written by a close confidant of the king. End summary.

CALLING FOR THE PRIME MINISTER'S RESIGNATION

¶2. (SBU) The opening of the Tongan parliament on May 28 was filled with political intrigue after a letter calling for the resignation of PM Sevele was reportedly delivered to him while he was en route to the PALM 5 summit in Japan. The letter also recommends as Sevele's replacement, Crown Prince (and Tongan High Commissioner to Australia) Tupouto'a-Lavaka. Emeline Tuita, a former Tongan ambassador to China and close associate of King George Tupou V, authored the letter after coordinating meetings with the speaker of parliament, the nine nobles' representatives and the Tongatapu No.1 People's Representative in parliament, Akilisi Pohiva (who is also Tonga's leading pro-democracy activist) to discuss key political, economic and fiscal issues facing the Kingdom. The letter was passed around in government and political circles before its eventual leak to the public. According to a source close to the royal family, the letter has caused a rift in the king's family, with Princess Salote Mafile'o Pilolevu Tuita (the king's sister who acts as regent when the king is away) supporting the prime minister and her brother, Crown Prince Tupouto'a-Lavaka, supporting Tuita.

A LAUNDRY LIST OF GRIEVANCES

¶3. (SBU) The letter proclaims "consensus amongst the parties that the Kingdom is currently in an intolerable fiscal, economic and political crisis that can only be resolved through uniting the Nobles and the People of Tonga with the common goal to support His Majesty King George Tupou V's vision for the Kingdom." It outlines the key issues with the Sevele government, including his "counterproductive" leadership style, concern about escalating lack of transparency and accountability of government, concern over the king's "guilt by association" with the PM's policies, the "overpowering role" of government combined with the PM's "conflict of interest" at every level in which he operates, and the need for the nobility to intervene in order to avoid a crisis similar to the 2006 riots over the slow pace of democratic reform.

PRIME MINISTER'S SUPPORT ERODING

¶4. (SBU) Some speculate that the recent resignation of three government ministers was due to their concerns over the leadership

style of the prime minister, although with reforms due to be implemented in 2009-2010, the current ministers' positions would be eliminated anyway. Former Attorney General and Minister of Justice Alisi Afeaki Taumoepeau has privately hinted at her differences with the prime minister, including the way the PM wants to go about amending the Constitution and legislation. Taumoepeau said Sevele wanted to "take short cuts" with some reform initiatives, suggesting parliament be bypassed if possible.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) The letter and the issues it raises cannot be easily ignored. During the month leading up to the 2006 riots, a petition calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Sevele widely circulated with much public support. The government largely ignored it, and Sevele dismissed it as a publicity stunt. A commoner, Sevele has never been completely accepted by the nobles, and his leadership style has rubbed others in the government the wrong way. The king's position is not known, but Tuita is a close confidant of the king and prior to becoming Tonga's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China was the chief operating officer of the king's Shoreline Group of companies.

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